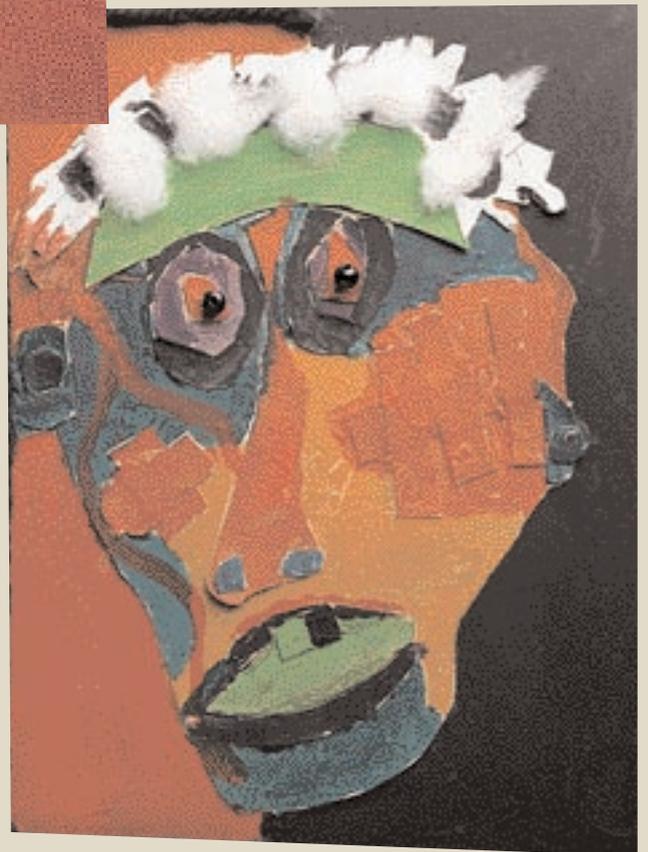Ashley Gonzalez

Levels of Emotion

by Marcia H. Buban

It is not surprising that children are easily motivated to create artworks based on the human face. After all, portraiture is one subject for which students can bring years of observational research to their work. From an early age, a child can distinguish parents from other individuals and even begin the complicated process of extracting an emotional statement from an arched or furrowed brow.

As the Bluffsview fourth-graders entered the art room, their attention was immediately drawn to the Expressionist portraits displayed in the front of the room. When asked for individual reactions to the posters, the students called upon the vocabulary of previous lessons, describing the portraits as "abstract."

Soon students were asking why the artists chose abstraction as their artistic style and why the colors were not natural. It didn't take long for the word "exaggeration" to surface as we talked about the Expressionists and their passion to distort shape and color as an expression of emotion and feeling. As mirrors were passed to each member of the class, I described brief scenarios intended to create expressions, of "happy," "sad,"

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"angry" and "surprise." The students practiced these expressions, noting from their reflections what happened to the lines in their faces as their emotions changed.

It was time to record our observations. Students were given 12" x 9" sheets of newsprint and were asked to select one emotion. They were then instructed to sketch an exaggerated portrait of the emotion, filling the entire page.

The following week, two pieces of 12" x 9" cardboard were given to each student. The class was asked to cut out their newsprint portrait and after tracing the entire silhouette on one piece of the cardboard, cut out the shape and glue it to the second sheet of cardboard. The process continued by cutting each of the larger features from the

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newsprint shape, tracing it on the cardboard, cutting the traced shape out and gluing each to the final artwork. Students continued cutting smaller shapes from within larger shapes and gluing each new shape to the final art piece. Careful attention was given to spreading the glue all the way to the edges of the bottom pieces to ensure that the added pieces would not curl. In the end, our portraits took on the appearance of a topographical map.

As the class gathered for discussion the third week, the colorless portraits and the abstract prints welcomed us from the front of the room. Before we delved into the benefits of

adding color, I couldn't help but use this opportunity to review the concept of relief work. The high-reliefs that the fourth grade had created the previous year protruded well off the surface of their work and I wanted to emphasize the opposite effect of a bas-relief technique.

Although the cardboard portraits showed emotion through the selection of organic and geometric shapes, it was obvious after comparing the cardboard faces to the posters that color would be an intricate part of the project's success. Students were quick to make individual judgments as to the colors that would best express the emotion they had chosen to illustrate. The effects of warm and cool colors, the mixing of tints and shades, and the fact that the complementary colors offer high contrast and excitement to work were all reviewed.

Upon the completion of the painting, found objects were offered for emphasis. Feathers, cotton, sprinkles, plastic flowers and the like helped the students to better emphasize the desired emotion they were trying to express.

The completed portraits were displayed in the hall in a quilt-like fashion, fitting the faces close to one another. While the display made a striking example of fourth-grade creativity, I believe that the students learned how to better express themselves through the use of shape and color. ∎

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